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Busch Whacked

BY DAVID DAVIS

Baseball players are the weirdest of all. I think it's all that organ music.

—writer Peter Gent

What with all the hemorrhaging and then the life-support system, it was touch-and-go for a while. But baseball still has a pulse, and I suppose we should be grateful for that.

Certainly, baseball bounced back in 1995. The upstart Seattle Mariners rode Randy Johnson's left arm past the California Angels and the New York Yankees, only to come up short against a revived Cleveland Indians franchise. The Atlanta Braves, blessed with a pitching staff as finely tuned as an Indy car, finally won a championship. Individually, there was the endurance of Cal Ripken Jr., the power of Albert Belle, the batting magic of Tony Gwynn. Locally, Raul Mondesi, Mike Piazza, Eric Karros — along with newcomers Hideo Nomo and Ismael Valdes — lit up Dodger Stadium, while down the 5 in Anaheim there's a collection of young talent to take your breath away. Other vital signs include baseball's new, lucrative TV contract with Fox, several stadiums in the green-light stage (including state-of-the-art edifices in Seattle and San Francisco) and expansion plans for 1998.

But the bitterness that remains from the aborted 1994 season and the abbreviated 1995 season is not so easily forgotten. Baseball still hasn't cleaned up its own house. A long-term collective-bargaining agreement between the owners and the players doesn't exist, nor does an independent, good-for-the-game commissioner's office. These are minor, quasi-structural quibbles compared to anecdotal reports that the continuity and esprit de corps that baseball always inspired has disappeared, with the result that baseball is no longer a part of our collective soul. The Game is now just a game.

And so, while I'd like to revel in the exploits of Nomo and Ripken and Belle, and prepare myself for the upcoming season, I keep coming back to The Dilemma Known as Mike Busch. Last summer, in the middle of the pennant race, the Dodgers called up Busch, a journeyman third baseman from the minor leagues, to back up Tim Wallach, their starting third baseman, in case Wallach was unable to bounce back from a nasty leg injury. The move angered Dodgers players, because Busch was a scab — i.e., someone who had agreed to cross the picket line and be a "replacement player" if the strike-walkout continued throughout the 1995 season. When the news broke that Busch was on his way from Albuquerque, several Dodgers made some unfortunate but, to them, entirely justifiable remarks about how they'd "ice" Busch once he reported to the club.

After Busch joined the Dodgers, four players (including Busch) held a hastily arranged and uncomfortable press conference in an effort to show that some sort of peace had been achieved within the ranks. An edited version of the players' remarks was then aired over the stadium's scoreboard, which failed to placate those Dodgers fans who saw through the *Capricorn One*–like sham. The crowd turned on the outspoken unionites (most prominently Brett Butler), booing them at every opportunity, and cheered Busch's every move (including his pinch-hit strikeout in the seventh inning). The only event in recent memory that was any more surreal was watching Angelenos applauding Al Cowlings as he steered a white Bronco across the city. (Needless to say, the Dodgers didn't advance far in the playoffs.)

This season, sans Busch, Dodger Stadium will be a more pleasant place to park oneself. The Dodgers have improved themselves significantly, including an upgrade at shortstop (Greg Gagne for José Offerman) and in the bullpen (they've added, among others, Scott Radinsky). The Dodgers are the prohibitive favorites to take the weakened Western Division; their major competition in the post-season is expected to be the defending-champion Atlanta Braves.

L.A. might give the Braves a run for their rings, but the team will have to answer several questions: Can 36-year-old closer Todd Worrell still bring it? Which Delino DeShields, now batting leadoff, will show up? Can Todd Hollandsworth — or Roger Cedeño — adequately fill the left-field vacancy? Will third baseman Mike Blowers adjust to the National League? Is Pedro Astacio ready to hold down the fifth starter's spot? And, the granddaddy question of them all: Is this manager Tommy Lasorda's last season?

THE 6th ANNUAL BASEBALL ISSUE

KATHLEEN CLARK

No Skirts Allowed

In this league, the ballpark doesn't have peanut-flinging vendors or tune-grinding organists. You won't find Mike, Cal or Hideo playing here; it's more like Claire, Hilda and Pam. And they don't wear skirts.

The Women's Baseball Association (WBA) is the only hardball league for women in L.A. County. The nonprofit amateur league, which begins its third season on April 14 at Santa Monica's Clover Park, will field three teams from Los Angeles and two from Orange County. The WBA runs two sessions a year, from April to July and from August to November; the July 4th weekend is set aside for a WBA-run tournament, which will draw teams from Phoenix and other parts of the country. Members pay $70 per session, and the funds are used for field fees, insurance, umpire fees and equipment.

Bridget Wold, the president of the WBA, decided to form a women's baseball league after her experiences in the women's division of a men's baseball organization, the National Adult Baseball Association (NABA). Wold was turned off by the substandard playing conditions for women in the NABA, where women had to make do without certain equipment and play in ballparks filled with litter.

"Girls fight to play in Little League and in high school, but then the fight is over," says Wold, who played third base and catcher on the Santa Monica High boys' baseball team. "Women either play softball or don't play at all. I wanted to give women the option to play hardball."

After meeting with coaches from existing NABA women's teams, Wold founded the WBA, which is not affiliated with the country's other women's baseball league, the National Women's Baseball Association (NWBA). The WBA's first years haven't been easy: there are about 2,000 women nationally playing baseball, the majority of whom play in the women's division of the NABA. But the WBA's level of play has improved each season. Wold's sister, Gina Satriano, a right-handed pitcher who will join the WBA this season, played for the Colorado Silver Bullets, the only professional women's baseball team.

"The main goal is to get more women playing," says Wold, who will focus on advertising and gaining regional sponsorship this summer. "Baseball has a whole different electricity than softball."

—Chris Bennett

UNPLUGGED

lyn in '58, beat the White Sox — which to some diehards was less an exception than evidence of a New York diaspora. The macrocosm was too immense, too blessed with conspicuous achievement, to ignore — your proverbial embarrassment of riches. If you got sick of pulling for the Yankees, who during that span were in the Series 14 times, winning nine, you could root for the Dodgers — which I did in '55, the year they finally won (though next year I was back with the Yankees, who in one game no-hit the Bums, as they were affectionately known, and humiliated them 9-0 — I remember the score — in the final). In '54 even the Giants got in the act, winning four straight from Cleveland, spotlighted in Game One by Willie Mays' hot-shit catch of Vic Wertz's long fly to center. After the Dodgers and Giants split, the years without a National League team were not exactly uneventful. Roger Maris hitting his 61 in '61 (baseball as a verb imitation at its coolest and crassest), and then came the Mets, who were *great* bad when they were bad and went from shit to Shinola in, well, only seven years. Blah blah . . .

The memory of which is not only where I embrace baseball, it's where in retrospect I unplug from it. A home-team stooge is all I ever was, no less heinous for the fact that I had four home teams to choose from. Home is where crowd control begins, it's the fount of much (if not all) anthropological repugnance, it's what you grow up (if you're lucky) to ESCAPE. Baseball as an expression of civic pride: keep it. Fortunately, I was never seduced by the West Coast version of the Dodgers, no longer Bums (in naming their banker Drysdale, the *Beverly Hillbillies* were on to something). Today, in Portland — oops, I almost called it home — I'm glad to be somewhere with a single-A team that this year missed the playoffs. The fetid stink of victory: you can keep that too. Us versus Them — "team play" — dunno 'bout you, but after Ollie North I don't even wanna *hear* such nonsense.

Baseball has always been on the cutting edge of crowd control. "Casey at the Bat" was already reveling in such shuck in the 1880s. It's a blunt cutting edge of course, 'cause after all it's only baseball, but still: closeups of players' expressions to put "situations" in italics . . . closeups of their fretting wives (fans) (owners) to give them poignancy . . . presidents and worse throwing out first balls (which are not subsequently used) . . . Jim Nabors belting out a stirring "S.S. Banner" . . . Roseanne getting crapped on for having her way with same . . . no beer in the bleachers of Dodger Stadium . . . "Baseball Fever — catch it!" Thanks, I'd rather eat a cleat.

Where I started unplugging was the Series of the year it became obvious the country was being given back to the farmer. 1975 — does anyone remember? — phase one of the Ford-Carter Era's table-setting of U.S. culture for Reagan. Cincinnati vs. Boston, an "old-fashioned" matchup (between two racist organizations), featuring among other things the deification of Pete Rose — third only to those of Steve Garvey and Richard Nixon in the annals of loathsome etcet. Before then he'd been a winner only in playoffs and All-Star games, see, never the Series itself — so it wasn't official. All U.S. sport-as-dealt has taken a nosedive since the '70s, even wrestling, but baseball was first — you read it here.

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